

Costa Rica's 2014 presidential election was held against a backdrop of growing public dissatisfaction with the state of the country's democracy. Persistent corruption and crime dogged the outgoing administration of Laura Chinchilla, and ultimately resulted in a resounding presidential victory for the opposition.

While the quality of life in Costa Rica is relatively high for the region, economic growth is hampered by the national debt, inflation, and cost-of-living increases. Despite record investment in recent years, poverty, inequality, and unemployment remain persistent problems. The country's fiscal deficit was 5.8 percent in 2014 and was expected to reach 6 percent in 2015, leading the Moody's rating agency to downgrade Costa Rica's credit rating to junk status in September 2014.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 37 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

The president of Costa Rica and members of the 57-seat, unicameral Legislative Assembly are elected for four-year terms and can seek a nonconsecutive second term. Presidential candidates must win 40 percent of the vote to avoid a run-off election. A special chamber of the Supreme Court chooses an independent national election commission. Ahead of the 2010 elections, Costa Rica approved reforms to its electoral law, including revised regulations on political party and campaign financing, and new quotas for women's participation in political parties. In the 2014 elections Costa Ricans residing abroad were allowed to vote for the first time, and a new quota requiring that 50 percent of party lists be women went into effect.

In legislative elections held in February 2014, the National Liberation Party (PLN) won 18 seats, followed by the Citizens' Action Party (PAC) with 13, the Broad Front (FA) with 9, and the Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) with 8; five smaller parties won the remaining 9 seats. International observers highlighted Costa Rica's commitment to democracy in the elections. In May, the PAC's Luis Guillermo Solís was elected president following a second round of voting. Solís, who had been polling in the third and fourth position in a field of 13 candidates before the first round of voting, faced the PLN's Johnny Araya in the runoff. Araya ceased campaign activities during the runoff campaign, and Solís proceeded to win 78 percent of the vote.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 15 / 16

The main political parties are the PLN, the PAC, and the PUSC. Since 1949, power in Costa Rica has alternated between the PLN and the PUSC. Dissatisfaction with party politics and political scandals resulted in defections from the PLN in the early 2000s. The newly formed PAC has become a rising force in Costa Rican politics as the PUSC has withered under the weight of various political scandals. By the 2014 elections, it appeared that Costa Rica's traditional two-party system had collapsed, as nine parties gained power and coalition negotiations ensued.

In August 2014, the legislature passed a constitutional reform defining Costa Rica as "multiethnic and plurinational." However, indigenous rights have not traditionally been a government priority.

C. Functioning of Government: 10 / 12

Every president since 1990 has been accused of corruption after leaving office, with the exception of Óscar Arias, who served from 2006 to 2010. In 2012, an appeals court overturned the corruption conviction of former president Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, who returned to court in 2013 to face embezzlement charges. Costa Rica was ranked 47 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The Chinchilla administration was likewise plagued by corruption revelations. Scandals and routine cabinet changes reinforced the lack of confidence in her administration; 15 cabinet ministers resigned for various reasons during her first 24 months in office. The president herself was embroiled in a scandal in 2013 when a jet she used to travel to Peru and Venezuela was reportedly linked to drug traffickers. The scandal forced the resignation of three administration officials, including Presidency Vice Minister Mauricio Boraschi, who was also head of the Office of Intelligence and Security and the antidrug commissioner. The lack of confidence in the Chinchilla administration had a dramatic impact on citizen attitudes toward democracy, as support for the political system declined during her presidency.

President Solís pledged to tackle corruption during his presidential campaign. In a speech commemorating his first 100 days in office, Solís highlighted the country's corruption problem, providing a wide range of examples of endemic corruption. He claimed that corruption cost the country 7 percent of its GDP. While much of this was attributed to prior administrations, members of Solís's inner circle, including his publicist Ivan Barrantes, Minister of the Presidency Melvin Jiménez, and PAC attorney Jorge Sibaja, were also allegedly involved in various acts of corruption. The president of the PAC, Rodrigo Alberto Carazo Zeledón, resigned in September following revelations that he has authorized payments to Barrantes and Sibaja.

Civil Liberties: 53 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 16 / 16

The Costa Rican media are generally free from state interference. Attacks against journalists are rare, and imprisonment was removed as a punishment for defamation in 2010. There are six privately owned dailies, and both public and commercial broadcast outlets are available, including at least four private television stations and more than 100 private radio stations. There have been reports of abuse of government advertising and direct pressure from senior officials to influence media content. Internet access is unrestricted. In 2013, lawmakers amended a controversial provision from a 2012 law that threatened prison terms for those who published secret political information. The revised law excludes prison sentences when the released information is in the public interest.

The government upholds freedom of religion in practice. Academic freedom is respected, and private discussion is generally free.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12

The constitution provides for freedoms of assembly and association, and numerous nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) are active. Although labor unions organize and mount frequent protests with minimal governmental interference, employers often ignore minimum wage and social security laws, and the resulting fines are insignificant. In February 2014, thousands of public employees protested peacefully in San José that the 0.43 percent wage increase approved by the government was a “starvation wage.” In October, dock workers went on strike to stop the privatization of a port, fearing a monopoly. Students and workers from other unions supported the protest, which ended with 68 strikers arrested.

F. Rule of Law: 13 / 16

The judicial branch is independent, with members elected by the legislature. However, there are often substantial delays in the judicial process, resulting in lengthy pretrial detention. There have been complaints of police brutality, and organized criminal networks are suspected of having infiltrated law enforcement institutions. A 2011 investigation of prison conditions revealed corruption, overcrowding, guard shortages, and guard-initiated abuse. Deadly prison riots in 2012 underscored the severity of overcrowding in prisons.

A 10-year crime reduction plan, introduced in 2011, is currently under implementation with the aim of promoting interagency coordination to combat growing public insecurity, crime, and narcotics trafficking. The country’s Pacific coast serves as a major drug transshipment route. Analysts have noted the presence of several Mexican drug cartels operating within the country. In 2013, it was reported that more than 80 percent of the arrests in the country were related to drug trafficking. The Ministry of Public Security has reported that most homicides in Costa Rica are related to organized crime. The number of homicides increased to 471 in 2014, 64 more than the previous year.

NGOs estimate that about 73 percent of the country’s 70,000 indigenous people have little access to health and education services, electricity, or potable water. Discrimination and land rights issues persist. Costa Ricans of African descent have also faced racial and economic discrimination.

A 2014 government survey revealed persisting discriminatory attitudes and practices among law enforcement officials toward LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. In a departure from his predecessor, President Solís expressed his support for the rights of the LGBT community in May 2014, raising the rainbow diversity flag at the presidential palace in observance of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. In May 2014, the legislature passed a law extending medical benefits to same-sex couples. The law, which went into effect in November, also provides for the extension hospital visitation to same-sex couples.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 13 / 16

Women face discrimination in the economic realm. Female household workers are subject to exploitation and lack legal protections. Despite the existence of domestic violence legislation, violence against women and children remains a problem. Costa Rica is one of a number of countries that has criminalized femicide, but the penalties apply only when the murder is committed by an intimate partner. The number of reported femicides has declined in recent years.

Costa Rica remains a transit and destination country for trafficked persons. In 2014, Costa Rica was a Tier 2 country in the U.S. State Department’s *Trafficking in Persons Report*. Sex trafficking, forced labor, and child sex tourism are serious problems. A 2013 law against human trafficking establishes penalties for

human trafficking and organ trafficking as well as a fund for victims and prevention efforts. Nevertheless, the 2014 report found that victim assistance and data collection remained inadequate.

President Solís supports civil unions and patrimonial rights for same-sex couples, but has not expressed support for same-sex marriage.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)